

CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

We have seen how, in the relatively brief span of a century, the recording industry has grown from a sporadic series of independent companies to corporations, conglomerates and, in the case of artistic-minded souls, home cookin'. We have also traced this history by interweaving the parallel if seemingly unrelated courses of classical, jazz and American folk music recordings.

Indeed, the history of both classical and jazz music in the 20th century is inextricably, almost mystically, linked to recordings, just as literature of the previous century was inextricably linked to others' books. To cite but one example in the classical world, the twelve-tone school of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern had virtually no impact on classical music composition *until* recordings made the music more accessible—until it allowed other burgeoning composers to hear how the music sounded in performance. This also applied to the atonal but not twelve-tone music of Charles Ives, Béla Bartók and even Stravinsky, who of all these composers was most often performed before 1950 but whose music was not really considered mainstream until the advent of the LP. Perhaps, in a sense, the proliferation of more tonal but still modern composers such as Debussy, Britten and Prokofiev helped pave the way for such acceptance, and it is to the credit of such older performers as Toscanini, Reiner, William Kapell and Yehudi Menuhin that they at least dabbled in this type of repertoire for the elucidation of millions of listeners beyond the reach of their live concerts. Perhaps, like flutist James Galway, they were very conscious of the unseen audience they were reaching through this medium, in addition to being aware of the fact that what they were inscribing onto wax or tape would outlive them by several generations.

As for jazz, enough ink has been spilled over the preservation and dissemination of the music through this medium that I need not go into much detail here. Even such critics as Le-roi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), who came to decry the attitude that jazz “only” existed in records when in fact listeners were denying themselves to hear the living music as performed, came to love records as a way of revisiting a specific moment in time with their favored musicians and revel in subtleties and details that were often lost when hearing the music “live.” Being in a live atmosphere involves a great many sensory influences, some of which can obscure or marginalize moments that fly by in the room or concert hall, but which are brought into sharp focus when the listener is forced to concentrate on listening only. Quite aside from those jazz musicians who owe their fame and/or influence to a posthumous appreciation of their records (Bix Beiderbecke, Jelly Roll Morton, Lennie Tristano, Herbie Nichols), there are many whose work underwent an immense critical reassessment after their deaths. Red Nichols, Pee Wee Russell, Henry “Red” Allen, Charlie Christian and Paul Gonsalves were all musicians whose true worth was only fully realized after their deaths, while others (such as Tommy Dorsey and Jonah Jones) have been devalued.

More interestingly, we have seen how the business of recording has usually been at odds with the art of music. As a commentator on the new NBC television program “Studio 60” put it, art has always been at odds with commerce, but right now “art is getting the crap beaten out of it.” Without such passionate promoters of the music as Fred Gaisberg, Goddard Leiberson, Teo Macero, Neshuhi Etregun or even Walter Legge, it is certain that we wouldn't even have as much as we do on record to enjoy. Hector Berlioz had it right when he said, “The conditions for great art are never ideal; they are just more or less unfavorable.”

Undoubtedly, the reader of other nationalities must think this a peculiarly xenophobic history, but it was particularly fashioned this way for two reasons. One is that, regardless of the country, time or financial climate, indigenous pop music has always subsidized that na-

tion's art music on records. The other is that, since the time of television and stereo, 8-tracks and cassettes, it has been the Americans who have—in my view, unfortunately—led the way for popular culture around the world. Though it took another twenty years for it to happen, American pop culture has, sadly, become the pop culture of many other nations...too many, in fact. When the Berlin wall came down in 1986, East Germans were not eager to go to the Philharmonie to hear von Karajan conduct; they wanted to hear the American rock groups that their West German cousins went to see. And in the 1990s Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, built a statue in honor of not one of its own, but of renegade rockster Frank Zappa.

Observers as different in tone and ideals as Carl Sandburg and Theodor Adorno, Albert Einstein and Ayn Rand, all warned about the influence of popular culture on the minds of the young because they become the leaders of tomorrow. Politically and socially, there were never two people as diametrically opposed to each other as Sandburg and Rand, yet both refused to listen to or promote what they called “trash music.” They thought there was too much at stake for the future of the world for it to degenerate to that point.

But degenerate it did. Fueled by the “Hippie revolution” of the 1960s, a generation of rich, spoiled brats—and I choose those words quite carefully—came into power as the result of their less wealthy and/or less fortunate brethren being killed in the swamp marshes of Vietnam, or of fleeing to Canada to escape what they (perhaps portentously) saw as the decline of American civilization. This is certainly not a book of a sociological nature, yet invariably the culture of a nation is not only dependent upon but interrelated to its culture. When “high art” jumped off a cliff, not-so-gently pushed by a media business whose overriding commercial success depended on such a death, minds followed. As late as 1996 the Rockefeller Foundation stated that English, Science, Mathematics and Music were the four most important subjects that could or should be taught in schools. One could haggle or differ with their findings, but it is interesting that Music was chosen over many other fields of endeavor, including not only Religion but Geography and History.

The devolution of the record industry, as we have seen, did not parallel the devastation wrought on cultures by war, famine or natural disaster. Both the large companies and independent producers were committed to producing great music on record throughout both World Wars, the Depression that bridged them, even during the Cold War and Vietnam. But Allan Bloom's predicted “Closing of the American Mind” has certainly never occurred more quickly or more completely. When, after the events of September 11, 2001, I mentioned to a minister that I took solace in the music produced by war captives and Concentration Camp victims such as Olivier Messiaen and Viktor Ullmann, she looked at me as if I were crazy. Being much younger than myself, her comment was, “We didn't know how to rock and roll any more.”

With the rift between popular music and art music ever widening, it is not really surprising that the majority of music packaged today as “classical”—even some legitimate classical music—as well as jazz, is actually geared towards an easy-listening market. Classical PBS stations nationwide promote their music for relaxation, not stimulation; their goal seems to be to relax their listeners after a stressful day, not to broaden one's mind or touch deeper feelings. This attitude was exacerbated by the book “The Mozart Effect,” which insisted that exposing one's offspring to the music of the Austrian composer could conceivably make them more intelligent. But parents who took the book up on its claims did so not to enhance artistic feelings or create artists, but to make them more competitive in the business world, much like those kindergartens that promise to “fast track” their charges into management roles. We

have certainly come a long way from the days when music was designed to stimulate the qualities that make us more human, not more mercenary.

Perhaps this trend will continue for as long as classical music is able to stick around, which I feel will be perhaps for another century, no more; but it has certainly met with resistance from classical musicians themselves. No more antithetical reaction has been seen than that which came from Polish composer Henryk Gorecki, whose Third Symphony became a runaway bestseller for Nonesuch. When Gorecki learned that his music, written as a paean to all those who suffered or lost relatives in the Second World War, was being used as a soothing device for stressed-out accountants and executives, he adamantly refused to allow any more of his music to be recorded. EMI received a similar rebuff from the monks who produced the CD “Chant,” but that was a somewhat different case, as this music was religious, not classical.

Or is it all that different? There are many, myself included, who hear in music an expression of the Divine. Pianist Bill Evans once said that all creative music came from the “universal overmind,” a sort of Zen concept in which all the spirits of the air (to use the title of a song by Henry Purcell) coalesce the feelings, thoughts and ideas of those who have passed before us. Many of the best composers and jazz improvisers felt that their inspiration “came from above,” and in a sense they may be right. For all the hard work and craft involved in composing, that touch of inspiration leading to the finished product is what separates the great work from the merely academic.

As for the “smoothing-out” of classical and jazz music performance, a lot has been blamed on recordings that fostered an artificial perfection. But this is not completely the case. Recordings raised the technical levels of solo and orchestral playing to unbelievably high levels, especially in the years since 1985. But perfection of technique alone is not to blame for an omission of feeling. The truth is that, since most of the famous classical musicians at the top don’t have any real stress or fear for economic survival, they have no incentive to play music from the gut. The glassy, glossy performances they produce are “good enough” for a market in which technical perfection, and a generally musical traversal of the score, is really all that’s required to move product. Soprano Cecilia Bartoli, Violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, pianist Anne Marie McDermott, and jazz pianist-singer Dena DeRose are all part of a younger generation raised on records, yet their performances are consistently exciting and full of feeling. Nevertheless, it seems as if only “outsiders” like them really have the commitment to go beyond the notes and grab the heart and throat with the emotion of their performances.

I can understand but not sympathize with the adverse feelings that many musicians still harbor for recordings. Moreover, I do not understand the gender prejudice in record collecting that shifts the bias towards men. Talk of book collectors and the genders seem to be equally divided, though the types of books and subject-matter tend to be different; but talk about record collectors, even of classical music, even (let us say) of women composers, and the overwhelming majority are men. It has been said that this is because women don’t have the time to collect records, though they enjoy listening to the music; they are too busy cooking or cleaning or doing other things. Yet there are many men who do a lot of these same things, and they still find time to pursue their hobby—if they are dedicated to it.

We are now in the envious position of having more than a century of outstanding performances in jazz and classical music to listen to, learn from and nourish our souls, yet fewer people than ever before are listening to them. The cultural divide is caused, it seems, not so much by an inability to listen as a disinclination to do so. In our predominantly visual culture, absorbing what is heard seems more and more dependent on our ability to absorb what is

seen. This is one reason why chamber music concerts are virtually nonexistent except in universities while symphony orchestras struggle to bring in patrons. Unless one has dancing musicians in the orchestra or a mime troupe performing behind a lieder singer, no one seems willing to tolerate the much more passive act of just absorbing what the music has to tell us.

Of course, I am not so much concerned about the loss of what has already been recorded as I am about what is being lost by not being recorded. Some of the finest performers and performances of our time are being ignored by an industry that only cares about the bottom line. Just to cite one glaring example, there is Richard Danielpour's opera *Margaret Garner*, written to a libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison and dealing with the still-uncomfortable but important issue of slavery and race relations. *Margaret Garner* is by no means the greatest opera ever written, but it is a very good one, much finer than the dreck being performed as modern opera in many of today's houses; it deals with a subject that is important not only historically but intellectually, socially and spiritually; yet it has not attracted the interest of major opera houses, and it may fade into oblivion because no one is anxious to record it. (At this writing, Sony Classical has been discussing its release, but no commitment has yet been made.) And *Margaret Garner* is but one of hundreds of very fine compositions written over the past twenty years that have not been recorded and have no hope of it.

Perhaps, too, classical music is simply going through another cycle. The legendary impresario Hermann Wolf, who made his fortune by smartly identifying needs in the classical music world and providing artists to fill those needs, once said that there were always "cycles" in the musical world. Cycles "when temperamental players have success, and cycles when impersonal musicians please the public; at some periods the taste for the extra-musical prevails, at other mechanical accuracy is most admired... There came an era when pianists were all the rage and another when violinists were the stars; eras of prodigies, and times when no one would listen to children's playing."¹

We can only hope this is true. But please, for your own health, don't hold your breath.

Believe me when I say that I find it difficult to be so pessimistic—I, who has spent my entire life absorbed in the active pursuit of listening to great music regardless of the culture that produced it or the personality of its composer. But pessimism has been thrust upon me by the industry that once actively promoted the arts and the culture that once embraced it. I am, however, not as sure as some are that there is no way out. There certainly is. Early and persistent education in the training of one's ear, followed by later training in an instrument other than an electric guitar or drums and the historical culture of great music, can certainly help. As a small token of what can be done by a few persistent and dedicated individuals, I would like to close with the story of one small light in the wilderness: the radio program *Saint Paul Sunday*.

In 1981 Bill McLaughlin, former conductor of the Saint Paul (Minnesota) Chamber Orchestra, approached National Public Radio with the idea of doing a weekly radio show presenting some of the best classical chamber music groups and occasionally jazz musicians, two fields in which he had a strong interest. McLaughlin's cheery demeanor and easy way of explaining complex music without sounding preachy appealed to them, and so "Saint Paul Sunday Morning" was launched. Much to everyone's surprise, the show took off with listeners around the country. By the end of the century it had moved to its current time slot of 6:30 p.m. Sunday evenings and had its name shortened to simply "Saint Paul Sunday."

To say that the show is a national treasure is an understatement. It is, in fact, almost an international treasure. Backed by a dedicated staff of music-lovers who recommend specific

¹ Hambourg, Mark. *From Piano to Forte*, Cassell, London, 1931; p. 161.

artists and/or groups, *Saint Paul Sunday* has presented musicians, and music, from global sources playing music of global interest. Predictably, most of its repertoire centers on the Romantic chamber music repertoire, but the program has also given listeners a wide selection of British, Eastern European and Asian musicians and music, virtually spanning the full gamut of what is possible or presentable in such a program. The artists range from such well-known and respected luminaries as flutist James Galway, the Beaux Arts Quartet, pianist Adawagin Pratt and violinist Joshua Bell to such little-known but superb musicians as Fretwork, Eighth Blackbird, the Seattle Chamber Players and the St. Lawrence String Quartet.

Without question, the success of the program is directly related to McLaughlin's ability to sound both earthy and erudite at the same time. Listening to him talk, both to the artists and about the music, he is quickly able to relate their lives and personalities as people to the music they are playing as well as to the audience who is made to feel "one of the family." He points out salient passages in the scores with the zeal of a youngster discovering a new toy; he zones in on connecting threads and important bits of the music, sometimes part of the undertow rather than of the lead line, in such a way that he forces the listener to discover them with him. There have been, and continue to be, *Saint Paul Sunday* programs without McLaughlin, yet though they are interesting and musically delightful, they sadly lack the undercurrent of intelligent enthusiasm he brings to them.

In a sense, then, McLaughlin has succeeded Leonard Bernstein as the educator of a mass audience that may or may not be able to follow the music, but are perfectly willing and able to follow what McLaughlin has to say about it. One's only regret is that he can't feature all the great artists of the world, but only a select few sorted out from the thousands who could or should be on, but are not. Yet selectivity, in this case, is not a matter of exclusion but inclusion. McLaughlin has often stated that he would love to have every good musician on his show, but unfortunately only has time for fifteen to twenty a year, which unfortunately decrees an arbitrary selection process. Yet the show maintains its integrity and enthusiasm into its twenty-fifth year (2006) for the simple reason that Bill McLaughlin maintains *his* integrity and enthusiasm. In lieu of a national (or international) education system that will teach children the value of good music, or at any rate the fundamentals of it, McLaughlin and *Saint Paul Sunday* are a tonic that is both easy to take and good for the heart and spirit.

If I were asked to train an unformed mind in good listening habits, *Saint Paul Sunday* would be my number one choice for classical music. My second choice would be the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts—not because they are always the best opera performances in the world (they aren't), but because they do generally strive towards a high standard and because the Met's newest announcer, Margaret Juntwaite, judiciously combines the background and plot of each opera with fascinating historical tidbits, some of which I did not myself even know (for instance, that the reason Don Alvaro in "La Forza del Destino" was not considered a suitable husband for Leonora by her father was because he was Peruvian and mixed with African blood—in the original story, he is referred to as "Le Negre"). Such observations bring the social and artistic relevance of these works into sharp focus for listeners, especially first-time listeners.

Yet perhaps a decline in the proliferation of recordings will actually help us retreat and regroup, find our artistic center and move on in other directions. Without the general or specific influence of folk music, which died out as a direct result of the media glut of recordings, broadcasts and telecasts, music in the new century will have to find other ways of integrating with the sensibilities of listeners who, like the title character of the film "Educating Rita," want to find "better songs to sing." In the meantime, we now have one hundred and ten years of recordings to draw on for inspiration, education and enlightenment, and as such there is a

staggering, even overwhelming, treasure trove for listeners now and in the future to use for that purpose.

As for what to do if the entire recording system fails, I have adopted the attitude of the music downloaders. Take it where you can. If the record companies won't give you great music, copy it yourself. That being said, I am surprised by the chauvinistic approach taken by modern Yuppies towards the propriety of recorded music by the companies who initially recorded and marketed it. Recently, for instance, I read on a classical music group that anyone who downloads free music from the Net, even if it is freely and legitimately offered as such, is "stealing" from the company that produced it. This, of course, is nonsense. How many countless 78s and LPs were taped, copied and distributed to friends and family in the many decades before the advent of the CD? And this was even true in the early CD era, before the iPod and CD burner replaced the cassette recorder as a medium of dissemination. Would even Ohga or Karajan really care if their music was spread around this way? I hardly think so. Karajan paid little attention to the masses who could not afford tickets to his performances, but who were able to perhaps pool their finances to buy his records and send copies to relatives via tape, though he did manage to use his considerable power to ban unauthorized live tapings of his concerts and opera performances. The message? That he wanted to squeeze every last dime he could from the monied for the preservation and transmittal of his art, but that he wouldn't mind it if Joe Worker made a half-dozen copies of his Beethoven cycle or his Verdi Requiem for relatives and friends. As I said, he was an odd duck.

Ohga, perhaps, did care, at least to a point. In the 1990s, it was Sony who invented a CD with encoding that allowed the disc to be played properly but which distorted certain notes or pitches if the disc were copied digitally. This technology was applied, for a brief period, to all Sony discs, pop and classical, and was probably geared more towards stopping the piracy of pop music which, after all, filled the coffers much more than classical or jazz ever did. But this technology was scrapped after just a few months when it was discovered that people were simply making analog cassette tapes of the CDs (which they could do without distortion), then converting the tapes to .wav files and burning copies anyway.

And there is something new, or relatively new, as well. The web site C-NET, popularly known as Download.com, now features completely free jazz and classical downloads at their site (http://www.download.com/2001-20_4-0.html?tag=hd_ts). Not all of the artists are of equal quality—you have to know your own mind and judge for yourself—but there is a wealth of music to be found there, especially jazz. The superb pianists Dihelson Mendonica and Dan Papirany have tracks available there, as do excellent bands such as Jazz Conspiracy, the Walsall Jazz Orchestra and even Terence Blanchard, a well-known artist who records for Blue Note. Among the unknown gems to be found in classical are a supremely talented fifteen-year-old Swiss pianist, Kistian Cvetkovic, whose performance of the Beethoven "Moonlight" Sonata ranks among the finest I have ever heard. Evidently, this is going to be the wave of the future, and those artists who will charge an exorbitant fee for downloads are, in my view, going to lose out big-time in the future.

The musicians have all been paid for their services, they've done their job, the music is out there to be used for your mental and spiritual growth. For centuries, we have had gifted copyists who make superb facsimiles of great paintings. Books that enter the public domain are reprinted cheaply by small publishers in order to keep the author and his work alive. Music certainly deserves the same fate; future generations deserve to hear the works and musicians that mean the most to us. Short of a miraculous recovery by the recording industry, which I certainly do not expect considering its abuse of power and shocking greed, we owe it

to the future—if indeed a future for this music exists—to preserve and disseminate great performances that are otherwise locked up in the vaults, never again to see the light of day. Pass around the music you care about to others who want it as badly as you do; just don't charge any money for it. The corporations can only sue you if you try to make a profit, however miniscule, that they believe is theirs. They cannot sue you for making a gift from your heart to another's.

And that, after all, is what a great performance is: a gift. A gift to be treasured forever.